

**One quarter of all Veterans in the United States, 5.2 million, returned from active military careers to reside in rural communities. Veterans choose rural communities for a variety of reasons, such as closer proximity to family, friends, and community; open space for recreation; more privacy; lower cost of living; or less crowded towns and schools. While they may enjoy the benefits of rural living, these Veterans may also experience typical challenges accessing health care in rural areas such as provider shortages, distance to obtain care and lack of transportation options. These rural challenges may be exacerbated by injuries or illnesses related to one's military service.**

## Who are Rural Veterans?

Rural Veterans are a diverse group that range from young men and women who served in recent conflicts to elderly Veterans from World War II.

Compared to urban Veterans enrolled in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health system, enrolled rural Veterans are more likely to be:

- ▶ Male (six percent are women, a small but growing number)
- ▶ Caucasian (nine percent report being a racial or ethnic minority)
- ▶ Older (more than half are 65 years or older)
- ▶ Unemployed or low-income (54 percent earn an annual income of less than \$36,000)
- ▶ Married (more than 65 percent are currently married)
- ▶ Less technologically connected (36 percent do not access the internet)
- ▶ Living in Texas, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and California (i.e., states with the highest numbers of VA enrolled rural Veterans)
- ▶ Using VA health care (nearly half consider VA a primary source of health care)

**"The challenges delivering care to Veterans in rural communities calls for VA and community health care organizations to work together in constructing a high performing network to support the entire rural health care community through innovations in workforce enhancement and the use of technology across health care organizations to meet the demands of a modern, rural health care system."**

*—VA Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services Jennifer Lee, M.D.*

**Higher Rates of Enrollment:** 56 percent of all rural Veterans (2.9 million) are enrolled in the VA health care system—significantly higher than the 36 percent enrollment rate of urban Veterans. Of these enrolled rural Veterans, 82 percent<sup>1</sup> have other health insurance (e.g., Medicare, Medicaid, TRICARE, private insurance) in addition to their VA benefits.

**Unique Health Care Needs:** Rural communities tend to have more elderly residents and poorer health status. Four in 10 rural Veterans have at least one service-connected disability. Of younger Veterans, 15 percent of enrolled rural Veterans served in Iraq and/or Afghanistan. Many of the next generation of rural Veterans are faced with multiple medical issues related to military service that require significant, ongoing access to care. Additionally, the majority of older Veterans have one or more chronic conditions, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart conditions that require more frequent, ongoing, and costly care.

### Rural Health Care Delivery Challenges:

- ▶ *Provider and specialist shortages*
- ▶ *Fewer health care facilities*
- ▶ *Community hospital closings due to financial instability*
- ▶ *Geographic barriers*
- ▶ *Limited internet access*
- ▶ *Higher uninsured rates*
- ▶ *Higher poverty rates*

In 2006, Congress passed legislation (public law 109-461, Sec. 212) to establish the Office of Rural Health (ORH) to address rural Veteran's health care challenges through targeted research, programs and new models of care. ORH focuses on collaborations with federal, state and local entities that increase rural Veterans' access to care and support their health and well-being. ORH partnerships work to optimize the use of available and emerging technologies, leverage available resources, establish new access points to care, and employ strategies to increase health care options for all rural Veterans.

<sup>1</sup> Fiscal year 2015 Survey of Veteran Enrollees.

## Office of Rural Health

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) implements a targeted, solution-driven approach to increase access to care for the 3 million Veterans living in rural communities who rely on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for health care. As VA's lead advocate for rural Veterans, ORH works to see that America's Veterans thrive in rural communities. To accomplish this, ORH leverages its resources to increase rural Veterans' access to care and services. To learn more, visit [www.ruralhealth.va.gov](http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov).



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Revised: September 2016  
Learn more about ORH at [www.ruralhealth.va.gov](http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov)